

Local Social Mission of Higher Education: The Case of Eastern European Rural Faculties

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Introduction

In the past decade, a new issue has emerged in the scientific and political discourse on the mission of higher education institutions. Apart from education and research as their *traditional* functions, a further mission has been assigned to them as a consequence of national higher education policies, namely the contribution to the human and economic development of their social environment. The growing importance of this issue is reflected by the fact that in some countries such as Denmark and Sweden, a demand for social benefits is directly expressed by the latest amendments of the legal regulation of higher education (Göransson et al., 2009). Although this function of schools had always existed throughout the history of education, it has just lately gained significance in higher education policies.

This paper represents a summary of the main findings of a research project investigating the local impact of higher education faculties located in rural areas of Hungary, Eastern Europe. The primary focus of this study was the fulfilment of the social mission of rural higher education. The study seeks to answer the following question: To what extent higher education faculties promote local societies adapting to the changing socio-economic and environmental conditions?

Theoretical Background

In Eastern European rural space, the actuality of a functional analysis of higher education is provided by the profound and rapid transformation of both the global and national background of rural areas since the collapse of state socialism. As a result of this transformation, huge areas (sometimes even whole regions) have failed to join the global networks, lagging behind the more prosperous regions of their countries (Unwin et al., 2004). Due to growing spatial inequality, the social conflicts boosted by the collapse of state socialist economies and the various shock-therapies implemented for the sake of structural reform (as poverty, large scale unemployment, inequalities in the access to education, culture, health services and labour market, etc.), as well as the groups involved in these conflicts, have been over-represented in rural areas, most of which have been unable to join the global networks (Deacon, 2000; Hörschmann, 2004).

As a result of the neoliberal transition of post-socialist societies, both the demand for higher education degrees and the costs of attaining them have increased significantly (Kozma, 2004). Due to the simultaneous trends of expansion and social polarisation, a huge group of lower-class and lower-middle-class rural population will be seeking higher

education, thus demanding the availability of low-cost studies within a short commuting distance.

In this study, I examined the realisation of the social mission of higher education within the framework of functional analysis of institutions, focusing on the impacts of institutions on their social environment as organisational responses to the demands of the society. There are two types of ties between schools and their social environment: vertical ties binding them to state authorities and macro-society, and horizontal ones converting local needs and demands to the aims and vision of education institutions (Halász, 1990). In a functionalist approach, social contribution of schools is partly a manifest function declared by their authorised profile and mission statement, partly latent however, created by the needs of their local social environment (Kozma, 2004).

In most cases, horizontal ties account for the latent functions of higher education faculties, due to the informal lobbying and community-building activities of such agents as their local students (and their families), their local employees as well as those actors of local economy capitalising the human resource created by them (Brudney, 2001; Maurrasse, 2001). The contribution of faculties to their local environment can be present at each sphere of social existence, including community issues, economic, cultural and political life, and even the mental patterns of residents.

The technical framework of the present study is based on analysis input-output model, designed for the examination of short-term and long-term economic impacts of institutions by Leontief (1936). It was applied in higher education research pertaining to a peripheral-located college faculty in Scotland (Blake & McDowell, 1967), then adopted by numerous British and American impact studies throughout in the past half century (Lillis & Tonkovich, 1976; Goldstein, 1990; Batterbury & Hill, 2004; Hermansson et al., 2008). In this model, inputs involve all immediate benefits derived from the existence of a faculty as a local consumer, employer and an agent attracting young people to the locality from outside, while outputs are produced by the long-term benefits capitalised from the direct research and development activities, as well as the knowledge and human resource created by higher education (Figure 1).

In the past two decades, a number of impact studies applying the input-output model have provided empirical evidence that higher education can take a significant contribution to its socio-economic environment (Florax & Folmer, 1992; Huffman & Kigley, 2002). An important finding of these studies is that the proportion of inputs and outputs are determined by the local human and material environment.

While big regional centres benefit from the output impacts of their higher education institutions principally, small town faculties located in rural areas rather contribute by their inputs to the surrounding locality (Stokes & Coomes, 1996).

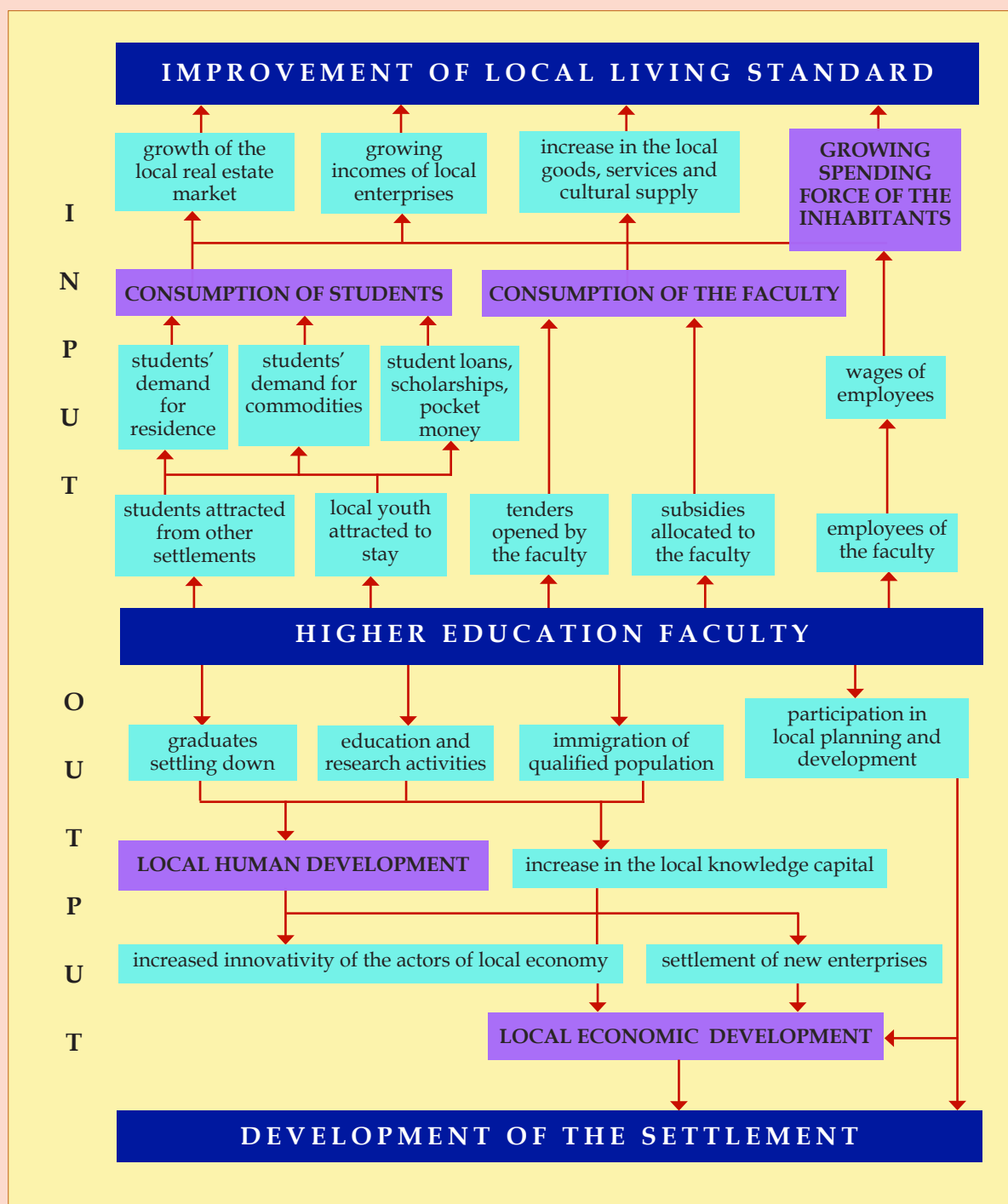


FIGURE 1 Input and output impacts of higher education

Source: The author's compilation.

Empirical Background

The empirical data presented in this study is supported by a field research on the local socio-economic impacts of higher education, realised from September 2006 to April 2007, in a sample involving four higher education faculties, namely Faculty of Agriculture of Szeged University in the town of Hódmezővásárhely, College Faculty of Teacher Training of Károli Gáspár University in Nagykőrös town, as well as Faculty of Education and Faculty of Agriculture, Water and Environmental Management of Tessedik Sámuel College, both located in the town of Szarvas.

In designing the empirical analysis for this study, the research endeavoured to adjust the methods to the character of the research topic, following Gadamer's principles (Gadamer,

2005 [1960]). The relatively low number and homogenous nature of lecturers called for qualitative research, while quantitative methods were needed by the more populous group of students as well as the demand for a comparative analysis of the different faculties. Having considered the above demands and the theories of the last two decades on methodology – especially the theses of Denzin and Lincoln (1998) and Ercikan and Roth (2006) – the decision was to use qualitative and quantitative methods simultaneously.

In this research, local impacts of faculties were investigated primarily by in-faculty data collection, such as document analysis, prominence interviews of leaders and lecturers, complemented by a survey among full-time students on their embeddedness into the society and economy of their town of studies (Table 1).

TABLE 1 Methods and database of the study

Method	Date of collecting data	Planned database	Database realised (total and by faculties)
Student survey	Fall 2006	200 to 240 (50 to 60 per faculty)	227 (55+46+76+50)
Prominence interviews	Winter 2006	28 to 36 (7 to 9 per faculty)	32 (7+8+10+8)
Document analysis	Spring 2007	4 (1 per faculty)	4 (1+1+1+1)

Main Findings

This current study provides empirical evidence on numerous local impacts by each observed faculty. An overall experience of this empirical research was the lack of small town institutions having significant input and output impacts on the local economy at the same time. While inputs are determined by the number of students and the range of programmes, outputs are relatively irrespective to the size of institutions, being influenced rather by their cooperation potential with local economical and political actors.

The favourable economic, touristic and demographic impacts of the presence of students was restricted to a few areas, such as off-campus retail and entertainment units and some local recreational facilities at the opening and closing weeks of semesters. Contrary to the researcher's assumption, students play minimal role as a source of immigration, due to the low level of local demand for the qualifications provided by the faculties. Nevertheless, the Szarvas case confirmed that a number of local ventures is capable in capturing a considerable share in students' consumption, even against the concurrency of great supply chains from outside the local economy.

Agriculture faculties have obviously greater impact on local economies than teacher training institutions. An explanation for this difference is that the profile of agriculture faculties is closer to the manufacturing sector, boosted by the long

tradition of cooperation between faculties and production plants, rooted in the agriculture system of the past socialist regime.

It was found an extensive partnership exists between the faculties and other local institutions. The premises of the faculties often served as scenes of community events, by hosting local cultural programmes such as festivals, and providing venue for the regular meetings of local NGOs. Moreover, some leaders and senior lecturers of the faculties were found to use the prestige of their employer as a supporting factor to enforce their economical, cultural and political roles in the local society. Examples of partnership with social and cultural institutions were observed particularly in the case of the education faculties. The Hódmezővásárhely case in particular, indicated an intensive cooperation with the local authority in the field of urban development.

In general, this empirical research indicates the lack of rurally located institutions having sizeable input and output impacts on the local economy at the same time. While inputs are determined by the number of students and the range of programmes, outputs are relatively independent from the size of institutions, and are not influenced by their cooperation potential with local economical and political actors.

Based on the research data, a reason for the above negative experience is that the Soviet-style model of specialised colleges, still prevalent in the higher education of small

towns in the Great Plain, is less suitable for fulfilling a social mission. This issue is addressed by the current development strategies of the observed faculties, envisioning a gradual upgrade to university status.

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On the grounds of the British higher education reforms of the 1990s, evaluated by Ianelli (2007), realisation of the above ambitions can be expected to result in a long-term development of both the affected institutions and the Hungarian higher education network as a whole.

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